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IS PASCAL A SAFE BET?

by

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of the requirements for the degree**

of

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The philosophical writings of Blaise Pascal may have passed completely unnoticed had it not been for the inclusion of his famous “wager”. “Pascal’s wager”, as it has come to be known, has drawn a great deal of commentary and criticism over the years and it has stirred up excitement and speculation over Pascal’s intended message. Many critics think his field of possibilities is too narrow. Some critics say that he allows for too few options, while others argue over the validity of his conclusion. In this essay we will discuss a number of the criticisms of Pascal’s wager that have been brought forth previously, as well as introduce some new ones. We shall consider alternative interpretations of Pascal’s idea, and weigh the outcomes of each. We will analyze Pascal’s idea from a traditional Christian perspective, citing passages from many writers to support the arguments.

Pascal’s wager begins by placing a probability on the existence of God. Pascal claims that there is a one-in-two chance that God exists, either “God is, or He is not” (Beardsley p. 116). Pascal claims that since our knowledge of God is limited, our reason can do nothing for us in making this decision. We are thus left with a game of chance. “A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager?” The most troubling aspect of these statements is the probability Pascal places on God’s existence. Alan Hájek found, in his essay on Pascal’s wager, that “unless more is said, the interpretation yields implausible, and even contradictory results. You have a one-in-a-million chance of winning the lottery; but either you win the lottery or you don’t, so each of these possibilities has probability $1/2$!” (Hájek, pt. 3). Hájek shows analogously that it is hard to assign this probability to God’s existence with each possibility bearing equal weight. Hájek continues later in the

passage, "To assign a probability at all—even $1/2$ —to God's existence is to feign having evidence that one in fact totally lacks. For unlike a coin that we know to be fair this metaphorical 'coin' is 'infinitely far' from us, hence apparently completely unknown to us" (Hájek, pt. 5, premise 2). Here Hájek raises a consideration that Pascal seems to have ignored, and he is correct to recognize the difficulty of assigning a probability to something so foreign to us.

Many critics of Pascal's wager have challenged the notion of there being only two choices in Pascal's wager claiming that it is a false dichotomy to assume that God is or He is not. Assuming that we are talking now of the traditional Christian God that rewards good and punishes evil, if we are assigning equal probability to God's existence and non-existence, then why should the number of possible electives be exhausted after considering only two? Hájek writes that Pascal was mistaken to limit the possibilities to the existence or non-existence of the Catholic God.

If Pascal is really right that reason can decide nothing here, then it would seem that various other theistic hypotheses are also live options. Pascal presumably had in mind the Catholic conception of God — let us suppose that this is the God who either 'exists' or 'does not exist'. By excluded middle, this is a partition. The objection, then, is that the partition is not sufficiently fine-grained, and the '(Catholic) God does not exist' column really subdivides into various *other* theistic hypotheses (Hájek, pt. 5 premise 1).

Hájek indicates that there are a plethora of gods one could believe in. One could believe in Zeus, Krishna or Thor with the hope of being handsomely rewarded for their beliefs and actions. Or a belief in a god that punishes individuals who "wager" on his existence could also be entertained. If this were the case Pascal would be leading us down a dangerous path. While the list of

potential outcomes Pascal is plausible and even acceptable to the traditional Christian believer, his wager is fraught with problems for some non-Christian religions.

It is likely that Pascal did not include choices such as Zeus and Thor in his wager because they were not considered viable options for his readers. In his day, and even now very few of his readers would seriously entertain these gods as possibilities for their god. Pascal was only concerned with the options relevant to his readers. Gods which had been passed on as mythology would not have been considered as real options.

Pascal continues by outlining the reasons we should choose to believe that God exists rather than choosing to believe that He does not exist. Pascal claims that by weighing the outcomes, the best of all possibilities is to believe in God. For if one believes in God and God does not exist then one loses nothing. But if one believes in God and God does indeed exist, one gains all. On the other hand, if one chooses *not* to believe in God and God does not exist there again one loses nothing. However, if one does not believe in God and God does in fact exist, one loses all. This cost/benefit approach is perhaps the best Pascal has offered. But this *bet-hedging* method only pays off if a) God exists, and if b) the god who exists is a god that deems the act of religiously hedging one's bet acceptable and good. Otherwise Pascal's advice may not prove so helpful.

Were it just so easy as hedging one's bet, then what would be wrong with everyone practicing as many varied and different religions as possible? Ahmad ibn Rustah, a 10th century explorer, told a story of a certain Caucasus king who prayed with the Muslims on Friday, observed the Sabbath with the Jews on Saturday, and attended

services with the Christians on Sunday. When asked why he was so undecided when it came to religion the king replied "Since each religion claims that it is the only true one and that the others are invalid, I have decided to hedge my bets" (wikipedia.com). One can only wonder if such faithless devotion is really what God or any god is really after.

Pascal concludes his wager by admonishing the unbeliever to take steps toward faithful belief by doing what believers do.

Endeavor to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions... Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe and deaden your acuteness (Beardsley p. 118).

This advice has proved especially troubling to many who have struggled with the idea of convincing themselves to believe in ideas or propositions which have no evidence in their support. W. K. Clifford writes that it is difficult to explore a topic with fairness to both sides of the issue if one is trying to believe only one side.

No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question, or even wishing to hold a belief on one side, can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiased; so that the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty (Pojman p. 365).

Clifford's concern stems from the writings of Pascal; he fears that by taking Pascal's final advice one may deprive oneself the ability to impartially inquire into a matter. Clifford fears that Pascal would have us shun doubt for the sake of peace of conscience.

Clifford compares this situation to a shipowner with a run-down ship in need of repair. The owner worried for a while about his ship, but finally decided to put his trust

in God. The shipowner knew that God would not fail to protect any and all passengers aboard his ship. The shipowner ignored all signs that his ship was not seaworthy. He let his ship set sail "with a light heart" and hoped the very best for those on board. When the ship sank in mid-ocean he happily collected his insurance money. Clifford admits that while the shipowner's belief that all would be well with his ship may have been sincere, he was guilty of the deaths of the passengers nevertheless because he failed to take the steps necessary to ensure the ship's safety. "[The shipowner] had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts" (Pojman, p. 364). To Clifford, the true crime is in acting on Pascal's advice to behave like a believer and to "deaden your acuteness." Clifford's great qualm with Pascal is acting like a believer when one has no evidence in support of such belief. "If a man, holding a belief...keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind...and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind" (Pojman, p. 367). Clifford would have us search the problem in question, hunt for answers wherever we can, and accept only those answers which have come after thorough investigation.

Louis Pojman asks if it is possible to will oneself to believe in a certain proposition. "In what sense can we get ourselves to believe propositions that the evidence doesn't force upon us? Surely we can't believe that the world is flat or that two plus two equals five simply by willing to do so, but which proposition (if any) are subject to volitional influences?...Does [this] involve self deception?" (Pojman p. 360) We cannot be expected to entertain propositions such as the world being flat, or that the sum of two and two is five. No, we cannot be expected to believe in such propositions

because there exists evidence to the contrary. Doing so would be like willing oneself to believe it is a beautiful, sunny day while standing in the pouring rain, waiting for the bus. The propositions Pojman speaks of have no bearing in this case, they differ greatly from the proposition "God exists." Pascal admits in another passage that "it is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is [equally] incomprehensible that He should not exist" (Beardsley, p. 115). Pascal knows the evidence on either side of this issue is less than convincing, and for this reason he offers his wager.

Clifford's approach is a great formula for ensuring that one accepts nothing dogmatically. However, his advice is fruitless if the evidence for supporting one's belief does not exist or is insufficient to prove one's beliefs. Clifford offers no help to individuals who struggle with Pascal's wager. When it comes to religion, evidence can be seen on both sides, depending on to which side one gives credence. Hence, the great divide when it comes to an issue of this kind. Analyzing this issue using Clifford's method leaves us in no better place than when we started, the evidence simply is not sufficient to convince. Clifford's argument does nothing to refute Pascal's wager. Pascal never intended to prove God's existence, his goal was only to show that believing in God was the best choice.

From a Christian standpoint, Pascal's argument is valid. He is right that, as there is no concrete evidence supporting God's existence or His non-existence, believing in God is the best choice because one will gain the most if God exists. While there are many objections to Pascal's wager, the conclusion is reasonable for the Christian world, but it would be difficult to say the same for other religions. This same conclusion would be valid for any religion that believes that the decisions we make and the trials we face

here are preparing us for a life after death, or an eternal life. A belief system that does not include an afterlife or that does not see an ultimate reward or punishment based on good and bad deeds committed probably would not regard Pascal's wager as something worth worrying about.